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Emerging from the Mist: French Universities and Global Rankings

Ludovic Highman

France's higher education system can be described as *sui generis* and has been categorized as fragmented, stratified, and multitype. From the early twenty-first century, France has been rationalizing its higher education system, following disappointment in the lacklustre performance of its institutions in global university rankings. To remedy this, government-initiated reform processes have sought to bridge the divide between *grandes écoles* and universities and encourage the reemergence of historic universities. To understand why the creation of strong French universities was challenging and, for a long time, an almost alien concept to French policy makers and academics alike, a brief historical overview is necessary.

From a Republic of Faculties to a Republic of Universities?

Following the French Revolution, all existing universities were abolished, many of which had originally been founded by papal bull (Montpellier in 1289, Grenoble in 1339, etc.) They were replaced in 1806 by a single, nationwide institution named alternatively the Imperial University, University of France, or simply *l'Université*. The latter was placed under the authority of a Grand Master, or minister responsible for faculties, with considerable powers over the recreated faculties (i.e., theology, law, medicine, humanities, and the sciences). These faculties developed independently from one another and with no institutional attachment beyond that of being under the aegis of *l'Université*.

In parallel, the *grandes écoles* were created with a vocational aim, that of providing the nation with engineering and military manpower. This created a new type of institution that would educate much of France's elites, outside of the university sector and unlike other European countries. The founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 had little effect on importing the Humboldtian model to France, and it was not until 1896 that separate faculties located in a same city were placed under a common institutional identity. However, the damage was done, allowing powerful faculty dynamics led by deans to override any centralized university-driven initiatives, leading to a so-called "Republic of Faculties."

Inspired by French academics looking toward the American model, the *loi Faure* of 1968 initially attempted to create autonomous and multidisciplinary research universities, responsible for their own administration, budget, and educational offer. However, the legacy of the "Republic of Faculties" proved too strong to curb, although some modest results were gained with the creation of multidisciplinary universities in small to middle-sized towns. Elsewhere, disciplinary and political alliances in large cities and in the capital proved too strong to reverse, leading to the creation of "universities" around one or two broad fields of related subjects, in other words, the previous faculties.

The Impetus for Reform

The first global ranking of universities in 2003, namely the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as Shanghai ranking, created what has domestically been referred to as the "Shanghai shock." There was much consternation at the relatively disappointing performance of French institutions. The poor standing of the prestigious *grandes écoles*, which in many cases ranked lower than French universities, was particularly devastating to the elites that it produced. This was perceived as a barrier to the attractiveness of French higher education and as hampering the competitiveness of France's knowledge-based economy.

It was not obvious to the powers that be what specialized universities could gain from merging into multidisciplinary institutions, so deeply enshrined were the disciplinary

Abstract

The French higher education landscape has been considerably altered in the early twenty-first century. In order to enhance the competitiveness of the sector at the global level, the French government has steered the system through structural policy processes aimed at consolidating it and overcoming the traditional divide between universities and *grandes écoles*, while providing incentive schemes rewarding mergers.

boundaries in academic (and student) minds. This was coupled with a general lack of interest from political elites, for a large part educated in *grandes écoles*. However, university rankings and the rise of the Emerging Global Model (EGM) of the research university put an end to this political apathy, challenging the mindset of French academics and university administrators.

Investing in the “Best”: Initiatives for Excellence

The Initiatives for Excellence (IDEX) scheme, launched in 2010 with the goal of developing five to 10 world-class universities, created profound structural change, far more effectively than previous incentive schemes (e.g., Plan Campus), if only because of the sheer magnitude of the allocated funding and the deliberate aim to implement a policy of differentiation within the university sector. This meant a significant departure from previous policy, which did not recognize any difference in status or quality between universities, or within any formal category of institutions. The relatively “flat” structure of the French university sector was about to become significantly vertically differentiated. The prestigious IDEX label has been awarded to 10 universities or consortia of institutions located in Aix-Marseille, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lyon, Nice, Paris, and Strasbourg, allowing institutions to present themselves, with the government’s stamp of approval, as France’s leading research universities.

The IDEX scheme sought to provide necessary incentives to finalize the ongoing structural consolidation of the sector (first in 2007 through the *pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur* [PRES], or research and higher education hubs, replaced in 2013 by the *communautés d’universités et établissements*, or communities of universities and higher education institutions [COMUE]). It rewards large-scale, multidisciplinary institutions with a strong research mission, either through the merging of *grandes écoles* with universities, or by merging specialized universities within the same city. One of the latest mergers finalized in 2019, Paris-Saclay University, now ranks 14th globally, in a ranking that sees both Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL) University and Sorbonne University breaking into the top 40, while the University of Paris and Grenoble-Alpes University appear in the top 100 (ARWU, 2020).

Conclusion

With such a traumatic history, it is unsurprising French universities have had a hard time finding their feet. The French higher education system has suffered from its parochialism and a self-imposed division between, on the one hand, large open-access universities catering for the majority of students, and on the other a professional elite training provided by small and selective *grandes écoles*, preparing students for senior executive positions in the civil service or the private sector.

It is no surprise that the most highly ranked universities are those that managed to overcome the fragmented nature of French higher education, and include the best of both worlds, namely the *grandes écoles* and the university sectors. The quality of French institutions has not suddenly exponentially improved, it was always there. However, successive governments have managed to harness that quality and reform the higher education landscape to allow it to translate and conform to globally accepted norms and concepts surrounding “world-class” universities and the increasingly dominant model of the EGM.

The consequences of this stratification on the vertical dimension remain to be seen, in particular the implications for access and student choice. By rehabilitating the university as the dominant medium of publicly funded instruction and research in France, policy makers and senior management in institutions have accepted global university templates provided by the Humboldtian model and the EGM. ▲

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